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The Art of Passing:
What Transgender People Can Teach Us About Gender
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Abstract

In this thesis I explore several published articles as well as the life-stories of five Caucasian, transgender informants from the Southeastern United States (specifically, long-term residents of Alabama). This research examines the role "passing" within the transgender community and contains information from interviewees who successfully passed as the opposite gender from the gender they were assigned at birth. These interviews helped me gain understanding, not only about the colorful lives of both those who are transgender and their partners, but also about patriarchy and the gender-binary system we, as Americans, are adhering to. It was my desire to learn from this local sub-culture by sitting down with each informant individually and asking them a set of questions, mostly about why they believe Westerners, specifically Americans, are adhering to a gender binary system rather than other worldwide, gender-variant identities.

There were many topics I assumed would emerge, including medical issues, violence, and legalities. Those issues are briefly covered, but my curiosity was piqued by the observations made about gender from the point of view of the participants who strongly passed as cisgender compared to those who are not able to physically pass for various reasons, or who choose to adhere to an identity outside of the binary system. Each of my informants started their transition later in life, meaning they have experienced being both male and female. By all appearances, they now pass as the gender by which they identify, have been accepted by their gender's peer group, and can now recount differences in what it means to be both male and female in America. Although the five informants claim that their "passing" has been worthwhile, there were still

liabilities associated with the transition. These liabilities will be the focus of my paper in addition to background information about each informant's life, creating a combination of research, statistics, and storytelling which I believe highlight problems within America's ethnocentric, gender system. Liabilities of "passing" include: one's ability to identify their own community, transgender awareness and visibility to those outside of the community, feeling pressured to adhere to gender norms as a safety precaution, physical discomfort, limitation of activities, health concerns, bitterness and jealousy within the transgender community, complicated romantic relationships, a dependency on the medical community which creates a certain element of exploitation, and the required diagnoses of having Gender Identity Disorder, or GID, before having access to hormones or surgeries.

Keywords: Gender Identity Disorder (GID), Passing, Transgender, Cisgender

The Art of Passing:

What Transgender People Can Teach Us About Gender

"People changed lots of other personal things all the time. They dyed their hair and dieted themselves to near death. They took steroids to build muscles and got breast implants and nose jobs so they'd resemble their favorite movie stars. They changed names and majors and jobs and husbands and wives. They changed religions and political parties. They moved across the country or the world — even changed nationalities. Why was gender the one sacred thing we weren't supposed to change? Who made that rule?"

Ellen Wittlinger, Parrotfish

The number of Americans identifying as transgender has already reached a staggering one million. Therefore, there is a possibility that in the near future genders will be mixed. Meaning, it is reasonable to believe that over time the transgender community will broaden and become more normalized and visible, creating and inspiring more fluidity within our gender-binary system.

When it comes to gender, "passing" refers to a person's ability to be regarded, at a glance, as either a cisgender female or male. A cisgender person is one whose gender identity is congruent with their biological sex. It is my belief that there is a small window of time currently open whereby transgender males and females who are successful at "passing" can experience our divisive, female/male dichotomy—able to reach deeply into society's unconscious, reporting on small nuances we would not normally be allowed to witness without being in the proper "gender

club.” The lifting of this type of smokescreen breaks down limitations that otherwise keep us from seeing how other genders operate. I am hoping to not only learn about and document local transgender lives, but also to use their dual-experience to examine how gender changes and shapes interactions among men and women. Lastly, instead of focusing on the benefits of "passing", this paper examines the liabilities.

I owe and bestow much gratitude to the local transgender community for taking the time to patiently share and trust me with their stories, helping me obtain information that I would not have been able to otherwise. For their safety, I have changed names and other identifying information. A special note of gratitude to Chris for inspiring this project by choosing vulnerability and trust while making a new friend.

The Art of Passing and Why It Is Taboo

"Passing" as one's preferred sex rather than as one's assigned sex is typically achieved through gender expression, usually involving external manifestations of gender cues such as pronouns, hairstyles, names, voice, behavior, clothing, etc. (GLADD Media Reference Guide). "Initially the term sex described the anatomical and other physical differences... sociologists of the 1970s adapted the term gender to be able to discuss femininity and masculinity as socially produced ways of acting (Holmes, 2007, p.18). The term "transgender" is a relatively new term: it was coined in the 1980s to help differentiate between being a transvestite and a transexual (Bischoff, 2011). It is an umbrella term that describes a person who does not identify with or conform to the conventional, binary notions of male or female genders including transsexuals (a person who is seeking medical assistance for their transition into a preferred gender), genderqueer (a person who does not identify as being distinctly masculine or feminine), and

sometimes even cross-dressers. It is important to note that cross-dressers, or drag queens, differ from transgender women in that they are usually gay men dressing as women for the sake of entertainment (GLADD Media Reference Guide).

"Passing" can be controversial. Some sociologists worry that the term might imply that the transgender community is trying to be something they are not, that they are trying to trick the public into accepting a false self rather than being true to who they are (Bischoff, 2011). I would argue, however, that it is the cisgender community that causes—or creates—"passing" due to their reactionary relationship with the transgender community. According to Bischoff, "... [g]endered violence is born out of the defiance of social norms. Gendered violence occurs when people live outside the accepted cultural norms for what it means to be a man or a woman" (Bischoff 2011, p. 115). "Passing" is something many aspire to in the community. The term has negative connotations because it implies that someone is *acting* like a cisgender—or *real*—woman and that, because someone looks a certain way, they will get a *pass* (Taylor, 2013).

To question the 'natural' basis of sex differences is to take part in a wider debate about whether human beings are a product of biological processes or of the social environment. This is known as the nature/ nurture debate. Most people agree that both the natural and the social shape us as individuals but some suggest that the natural is more important while others, including most sociologists, argue that social factors are most influential in making us who we are. (Holmes, 2007, p.18)

Transgender-Male Informants**Chris**

Chris is someone I saw on a daily basis for over a year and, because he passed so well, I never knew his story or that he was born female—his assigned sex. He had no idea that identifying as transgender was an option until Susan, whom he was dating and later married, saw a pregnant, transgender-man on television. She tells me that she ran to show Chris, who was still identifying as a lesbian at this point and had been depressed and confused over his identity for quite some time. Seeing the man on television, however, he saw someone with whom he could identify, and pieces from his past and present began to fall into place. “I thought, ‘Oh my God, you can do that?! That’s me! That’s me! That’s what I’ve always been!’” he told me.

As for his sexuality, he considers himself a pansexual (someone who is not limited in sexual choice by assigned gender, identity, or sexual biology) and has been with Susan since before starting his transition. According to a report conducted by The National Center for Transgender Equality and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (James, 2011), “An estimated 45 percent of those surveyed said that their relationship with a spouse or partner ended because of their transgender identity,” so Chris and Susan’s relationship is rare. Chris was quick to mention that being gay and transgender are not the same unless, of course, you identify as gay, which does occur in the transgender community. While sexual orientation is a part of one’s identity as it defines who you will connect with romantically as well as how your sex life will operate, gender identity is separate in that it describes who a person sees themselves as internally ([Transgender FAQ](#)). Gay and transgender communities also differ. The gay community has rallied around the idea that legislation should be passed because they were “born a certain way.”

However, the transgender community advocates that legislation be passed, not on biology, but on the merit that one should have the freedom to choose their own identity.

The dating scene can be particularly hard for transgender individuals because they are meeting someone while being perceived as a specific gender. If one chooses to not be upfront in explaining their genitalia to a love interest, sexual encounters can become complicated, risking revulsion from an unknowing partner. Even those partners who *do* know can later become confused about the encounter or the nature of their own sexuality and respond with violence or confusion. Chris says he does not know anyone else who has been in a partnership that, like his, dates back to before the transition, admitting that the community often has to deal with complicated love lives: “It’s a third gender with a new kind of sexual experience. There’s something different [sexually] where you can’t be male *or* female.”

Chris confides that he was androgynous before beginning his transition. His hair reached the middle of his back, he had sharp facial features, a rather flat chest, and clothes that society deemed masculine. Though friends and family were bothered when he was called “sir” or taken for a male, it made him feel curious. Already dressing in men’s clothing, cutting his hair off was the most drastic measure he’d taken. It gave him a rush. “It made me feel really good; it made me feel comfortable. At that point in my life, I could be whatever I wanted to,” he told me. He said there was a point in his life where he gained weight, which accentuated all things feminine about his body, creating a particularly depressing time where he was often perceived as a “butch lesbian.” His wife, Susan, feels strongly that females-to-males are resented and seen as a pariah from within the lesbian community.

Chris’s ability to pass is furthered with a daily binding ritual—a painful and laborious process of using compressing undergarments to minimize or flatten the breasts. He says it is

uncomfortable and makes exercise and going to a pool or the beach very difficult. Through hormone therapy, he has begun to grow body hair and more typical male muscles. “There are things I’ve gained from my transition that I always wanted but knew I’d never get, like facial hair. When my dad was younger, he grew facial hair and I always wanted to have a beard,” he said. Unfortunately, a lot of jobs require having a clean shaven face. Chris has not had any surgeries. However, he would be extremely interested in gender reassignment surgery *if* the technology were up to par, but technology has not come far enough to recreate a well-working penis that is affordable. “I don’t want something not appealing to the eye or not functional. I have a partner and there are things I would like to do sexually that I don’t have the right equipment for,” he said. However, in its absence he does not regularly participate in “packing,” the practice of wearing a prosthetic penis so as to not feel something is missing, to fill out clothing, or to create a changed stride when walking. He says he feels just as male without a penis and that packing is too uncomfortable because of the South’s weather and heat.

When I spoke to Chris about the difference between when he identified as a tomboy, as opposed to a male, he essentially replied that being male allowed him into the *boys club*, that “passing” put him on an equal footing with other boys. No matter how much he was a part of the group dynamic before, he was still apart from the group. “As a female, people treated me as though I was weak or fragile—especially because I was tiny. I was about 100 pounds. Now that I take testosterone, I’m larger and more muscular. As a male, people give me male jobs,” he said. He is now asked to do more strenuous activities, things where strength and brute-force are required, including more labor-intensive jobs at work compared to what he has been asked to do in the past. When analyzing America’s patriarchy, some would argue that men dominate because of their physicality. Sociologists challenge this idea by saying society creates those differences

by assigning physical roles and that, if physicality were the culprit, those assignments would be the same across the globe (Holmes, 2007). However, we know that is not the case. Different cultures have a variety of opinions and assignments when it comes to gender and suitable tasks (Holmes, 2007). For instance, Chris was previously seen as a frail female, unable to handle jobs that he was later deemed capable of merely because he presented as male. However, since he was always physically capable of completing the tasks, it became clear to him that society was assigning specific tasks based on gender rather than physical capabilities.

Chris has come to the realization that males change when a female is introduced, describing it as bizarre. According to Chris, their subject of conversation, body language, wording, and phrasing all change when a female enters the conversation (including transgender females). He also realized a shift in his interaction with females, saying that when he identified as a female, he could talk about things he now refrains from. Now, he has to be careful not to come across as though he is sexist because, if his interlocutors are not aware of his transgender status, he can be seen as pompous or threatening rather than someone who has literally been a female and truly understands what it is like to be such. In Chris' opinion, gender is a three-dimensional color wheel with no lines. All of the colors are capable of blurring together creating new combinations instead of simply slicing gender into neatly formed identities. While he presents himself as masculine and identifies as a transgender male, he still embraces and appreciates the parts of himself which are feminine. He feels males try to keep a tough image, but he does not feel the need to hide his emotions the way he feels many males do.

Bathrooms are where Chris is most aware of the need to pass, saying there were a few years where he was too fearful to use restrooms at his job and that he still feels very cautious, keeping an eye on everyone else who is in the men's room with him. He states that this is one of

the major places where "passing" can be both useful and safe as it helps him blend in. He said, "Not only are they dangerous, but they're extremely uncomfortable because you're fearful. Even now, with me passing, I'm very uncomfortable and won't use the urinal if there are other guys in there, because you always hear stories where someone decided to take them out in a violent fashion." Although taking testosterone does cause female genitalia to grow a small penis, it is not an actual penis in that the urethra is still separate. Therefore, for a transgender female to be able to use a urinal, one must purchase or build an "STP", i.e. a stand-to-pee device. Chris has built his own device. He feels it is very challenging, stressful, nasty, and inconvenient to always have to use a stall just to pee. He says, however, that he does hesitate to use urinals if there are many people in the bathroom and tries to not stand right next to someone to avoid conflict. Luckily, he has not witnessed such an experience first-hand.

Up until meeting Chris, I had never heard of body dysphoria or its association with to the transgender community. He likened dysphoria to anorexia and addictions to plastic surgery, for they, too, participate in a battle of the mind-body experience. Chris says people within the community who do not pass well have to deal with having their confidence torn down when people point them out or treat them as abnormal. He said, "A lot of being trans is in the mind. The most damage comes from internal warfare even though others can be a part of it at times. You're already always thinking about it, pointing out the negative parts." Because he passes better on some days than others, he has a love/hate relationship with "passing" and sees the mixed reactions he gets from people. Although Chris and many others have expressed their experience with dysphoria, there are others who do not appreciate society's fixation on this as the only reason someone would identify as transgender. As Greenberg (2012) notes:

Trans people have a historically dysfunctional relationship with the medical community

... In other words, trans people commonly need to convince a medical provider that they have a mental illness in order to obtain their desired medical treatment... Their access to medical providers and medical intervention is also predicated on their ability to pay because health insurance oftentimes does not cover transition-related care. (p.288)

The benefits of a transgender person changing their gender legally include improved employment opportunities, fiscal survival, and a higher quality of life, but the medical community makes this process agonizing for the transgender community. In order to receive...hormone-therapy and/or surgeries covered by insurance, one must have a diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder by medical professionals: “[T]he shame and self-doubt often experienced by survivors may be compounded by the stigma of mental illness attached to the diagnosis of ‘gender identity disorder.’ This stigma affects many trans people’s sense of self-esteem” (Greenberg, 2012, p. 210). This is a controversial topic within the transgender community because, while being diagnosed does enable health insurance coverage, which often saves lives, other transgender people feel they do not have gender dysphoria and do not appreciate the connotation and stigmatization of having a mental illness. Human rights consultant, Jack Byrne (2014), says, “Making medical steps a prerequisite for legal gender recognition also violates fundamental human rights. At the same time, denying trans people access to gender affirming health services undermines their right to health.” He goes on to say that requiring surgery for the sake of gender recognition should be considered, and is considered, sterilization by many countries. Transgender people can sometimes resent the power given to medical authorities to dictate who is branching outside of current, gender-normative conventions (Transgender References).

I found Louis in downtown Mobile at the Probate-office. He was protesting with a group of Mobilians over the office's refusal to give out marriage licenses to same-sex couples after federal laws mandated it. He is female-to-male, in his mid-to-late forties, and newly transitioned. Louis has not yet had gender reassignment surgery, but he is currently under the use of supervised-hormone therapy. This hormone therapy—along with his masculine clothing, the decision to put on weight, and double-mastectomy—allows him to pass as a rather serious and intimidating male.

He previously identified as a lesbian but now identifies as a straight male. He seconded Chris's notion that sexual identity differs from gender identity, which explains the cultural migration away from the word "transsexual" to the word "transgender." Williams (2012) argues that, though the term was not made popular until much later, the term "transgender" was used back in the 60s by transgender-female Christine Jorgensen, who was a model, actress, and Bond girl. "Ms. Jorgensen, now 56, said in a speech to Fresno State University students... 'Sexuality is who you sleep with, but gender is who you are'" (Williams, 2012).

Louis says one of the biggest issues he has had with "passing" involves medical care and the transgender community's inability to access insurance and health care. Luckily, he works for an industrial company that is international and covers health care for its transgender employees. His company even gave a special training session to his fellow co-workers on how to be sensitive during his transition, giving him an isolated office and adding an additional bathroom for his safety and convenience. He has been more than appreciative and knows these perks are only available due to the company being international. Job opportunities with such understanding administrators are limited locally. Louis says a nurse once brought him a catheter, basing his

medical care on his presentation rather than his medical chart, and thus unwittingly unveiling the need for proper training for transgender healthcare in Southern health facilities. Feeling privileged to be in the situation he is in, he now opens his home to those in the community who may need a place to stay or someone to talk to.

Since the conclusion of our interview, Louis has gone on to legally marry a female. The protests paid off, because he is still legally registered as a female since he has yet to have “bottom” surgery, also known as sex-reassignment surgery. Thus, ironically, the legalization of “same-sex marriage” enabled his own marriage.

Matthew

Matthew is a 25-year-old who was recommended to me by another participant. He has been in Mobile for over seven years. He now uses male pronouns and, along with Chris and Susan, sexually identifies as a pansexual. Although he has had sexual experiences with both females and males, he has never been in a long-term relationship with a male.

In sixth grade, he began thinking life would be easier if he were male. Later in life, he had a friend who began identifying as gay, and Matthew thought this person was a trailblazer for his own sexual identity. Never feeling comfortable with the word “lesbian,” he began to refer to himself as gay. While with his girlfriend, at 17 years old, he ran into a transgender person in a store. His curiosity was piqued, but his girlfriend admitted she would be uncomfortable if he decided to identify himself as the same. They eventually broke up, although he waited until years later to begin his transition. He was around 20 years old.

“Growing up, you can’t really tell anything because I presented myself the same as I do now. In high school I went through a period where I tried to present myself the way [a female] was supposed to,” he said. Conforming was not a major issue for Matthew’s parents because,

being the self-proclaimed favorite and youngest of five, he had siblings who were tomboyish and had already experimented with their sexuality. They did not seem to mind his short haircut or less-than-feminine appearance. Although he was allowed to be a masculine female, he told me the female identity never felt right, saying he did not realize how uncomfortable being a girl was until he stopped trying. A transgender friend mentioned he could try out being a male and see how it made him feel—how it fit—reminding Matthew that he could reverse whatever changes he made and grow his hair back out if that is what he wanted. (This is only true when hormones have not been taken.) He had been struggling with depression and said right away it was as though a light had been switched on. Simple things like going to a drive-through felt better when being called “sir.” “I come from a wealthy, middle-class family and I’m white,” he said. “I’m transitioning into a white male so it’s kind of like I’ve won all of the lotteries and nothing goes wrong in my life... I got called ‘fag’ a lot but that was pretty much the extent of my bullying.” He waited about a year before telling his family. “I called my sister one day and it happened by accident. I wanted to get something out of my car and I couldn’t because I didn’t have my binder on,” he said. She went on to encourage him to tell everyone. “[My brother] came home for Christmas and just looked at me and said, ‘You really look like a boy, no?’ and I said ‘Yep, that’s true’ and he asked if it was intentional and if I wanted to be a boy and I said ‘yes.’”

Matthew had already been using a more masculine version of his birth name after telling his parents at a very young age that he did not like the feminine version, which I am unable to state as this is still his legal name. He told his parents during half-time of the Maverick’s Basketball Championship game. His mother asked what it meant and, after a few months, she said she had been doing research on it and watched documentaries, wanting to learn more about his goals and asking what she could do to help out. His dad was a little more resistant, coming

from a Catholic background. He did not acknowledge the change at first, but eventually he got tipsy at a family gathering and said he loved Matthew no matter what and said Matthew seemed much happier.

His family eventually switched pronouns although it is still considered a victory if his father chooses to use the right ones. He said, "I don't think he knows how much it matters. He doesn't do it maliciously. I'm five years into my transition and I've been [in another state] the whole time so... we're just getting to the point where it's not a good excuse anymore."

As far as "passing" goes, he started hormones two years into his transition, at 22, but then he lost his insurance and had to stop. For the most part, hormone-therapy creates physiological changes which are irreversible. Even after ceasing to take hormones, face and body hair continues to grow and voices remain deep. However, there is usually a loss of muscle-mass, which bothered Matthew when he was unable to access testosterone. However, if he had had a hysterectomy, it would have been important to stay on hormones or else his bones would have started to deteriorate. He says he will go back to them when insurance once again covers the expense. From a young age, Matthew had a deep voice and a somewhat masculine face, often "passing" as a boy and having to try to actively be a female when being accused of being a male in a female's restroom. Therefore, he passed as male both before and after identifying as one. When he had insurance, he had planned on having top surgery—or a mastectomy—in December. He would love to have surgery but knows he will not be able to afford both top and bottom surgery and, because each costs around \$50,000, he does not want to have to pick between the two. For now, he binds daily.

Like Chris, he feels as though the technology is unable to create genitalia that would look and function the way he would prefer. There are two surgical options. The first is Phalloplasty

which offers a sizable penis with difficult erections, a lack of feeling, and a large amount of scarring due to skin grafting. Metoidioplasty, on the other hand, offers a four to five centimeter penis with full functionality. “I’m really vain. I don’t want any more scars than I need to have,” he said. He goes on to say that he feels it is easier for transgender-men to undergo hormonal transitions but easier for transgender-women to undergo surgical-transitions because of the high quality of breast implants and vaginal reconstructions. A large amount of skin grafting is necessary when surgically constructing a penis, which is not always authentic in appearance; it is still a relatively new technology.

Matthew says Mobile is the least-progressive place he has lived, and "passing" has made his life easier. He feels that, on a "passing" scale from one to ten, he passes as a ten with nobody identifying him as a woman anymore even though he has a feminine name. When he was still a student, if a professor called his birth name out on the first day of class, he would wait until after class to handle the issue. He said he had a speech class where he waited until the end of the semester to do his last speech on being transgender, and the entire class was floored. He also sold cosmetics for three years, at the beginning of his transition, and he said he presented a more effeminate side and dressed like a gay man and that, although he was often called a “faggot,” he was ecstatic to not be identified as a “dyke.”

As for restrooms, he is less worried about it five years into his transition, saying he has “learned the drill.” He used to have bathroom buddies—someone he would send to check the bathrooms beforehand because bathrooms sometimes only supply urinals or no door on the stalls. Matthew prefers private stalls as he chooses not to “pack” or carry an STP. He now checks on his own and if they are not up to his standards, he just pretends he came in to check on his appearance. Although he now feels comfortable in men’s restrooms, he knows that it remains

problematic for many in the transgender community and thinks that, while it may be a wild request, a solution might be to share restrooms rather than having them divided by sex.

Matthew believes being a male has made his life easier, saying he remembers how people treated him when he was female, how he has always been a smart guy but people seemed to notice it less before he presented himself as a male. Again, we address physicality:

As Margaret Mead (1962/1950) famously observed: different cultures may have different ideas about what tasks women and men should do, but in all cultures whatever men do is considered more valuable... women in African cultures do most of the hard labor and the heavy carrying. Still, the lighter tasks, done by men, are thought to be more important (Oakley, 1972, as cited in Holmes, 2007, p.28).

As evidence of this, Matthew currently has a female boss, and she has a male boss above her. He realized his boss can make a suggestion and, while it will be deemed a good idea, her boss will ignore her suggestions until Matthew repeats it. He says people used to do that to him before he transitioned, and now he realizes people do respond more positively to males than to females.

As a female, he suffered from self-harming, drinking, and fighting an eating disorder but says life was “golden” after transitioning. Medically, he has had a successful experience and has felt accepted by his medical practitioner. He accounts for this by saying he heavily networked with others in the transgender community before making any appointments. Matthew went to see a family doctor after being put on hormones, and the doctor wanted to give him a steroid shot, which he refused. Testosterone is notorious for causing liver damage, and information can be conflicting as not enough research has been conducted on the side effects of hormones on the body. Regardless of this, most try to steer clear of mixing testosterone with steroids. The medical

practitioners were getting a full history, asking for his medicines and—as he mentioned—testosterone. The doctor realized what was going on and was happy about it, telling him everything he needed to know from a medical perspective and wanting to run tests to check in on his health.

He has also encountered relatively few problems in the work force, often networking with other transgender males on where to find work. Matthew recognizes that he has had a good experience and says he feels he is an exception to most transgender rules and experiences. He knows people who do not pass well, including his roommate, who is currently struggling with his own gender identity—*treating* himself by dressing in drag on rare occasions, but only in queer spaces.

Matthew feels male-to-females have a much more violent experience. “I think men perpetuate violence against transgender women because [men] adhere to the patriarchy. If someone is going from female-to-male, it looks as though I bought into the patriarchy. I didn’t give anything up, I gained something, whereas a man cannot imagine wanting to become a woman. I think a lot of women can probably understand why it’s easier [to be a man], so male-to-female is a more alien concept. Why would you want to be a woman? The most insulting thing you can call someone is a ‘bitch’, a ‘cunt’, or a ‘vagina’.” Although it could be argued that “dick”, “bastard”, and “prick” are equally common and insulting terms, males usually use these terms in endearing and jovial ways, almost as rights of passage. Whereas the use among men of words like “pussy”, “twat”, or any of the formerly mentioned terms are meant to compare a male to a woman in an attempt to mortify, deflate, insult, or insinuate weakness. It is much rarer to overhear women calling each other “dicks,” or any other male-specific insult. Also, American men are traditionally viewed as having power over women. Similarly, a white American is

viewed as having power over an African-American. Therefore, "cunt," like "nigger," suggests an extended historical connotation when compared to terms such as "dick." He went on to explain that he realized all of these things before transitioning and that, even though he never wanted to adhere to that female normative of prom dresses and mascara, he chose this life because it enabled him to choose who he is rather than simply conforming to a choice which has given him an overall better outlook on life.

On the liabilities of "passing" Matthew says, "Before, when I was in a queer space and dressed more feminine, people on the street would acknowledge me and say 'you're similar to me' and acknowledge with a head nod that we've done and seen the same things, but now it separates me a little bit." For him, this has been the hardest part about transitioning and "passing." He passes as a straight guy really easily without trying. On the side, he sometimes works at a gay bar and, because it is not common knowledge that he is a transgender-male, he appears and identifies as a straight male. Sometimes, people want to know how someone straight could get a job there. Just the other day, he says, he had to throw a guy out of the bar because there was a festival going on which brought a huge crowd of straight females into the gay bar, which is not uncommon as many woman feel safer in gay bars, away from the aggressive behavior, harassment, and attention many receive from males elsewhere. However, this upset a particular gay male and he began venting to Matthew by saying, "You can't trust anyone that bleeds for a week out of the month." Matthew claims a lot of men—both gay and straight—say those things to him when they do not realize who they are talking to. "I'm undercover," he says, "because I fill that role so easily and they'll just start saying things to me that would normally be taboo." However, it is worth mentioning that many women maintain a strong and healthy

alliance with gay males, myself included, as both have been targets of violence inflicted by straight men.

As for dating both men and women, Matthew says, “When I’m talking to or sleeping with a woman, I make sure it’s much more egalitarian, but with men I’m much more aggressive and tell them they’re going to listen to me or fuck off. I think it’s because I don’t want to put up with their bullshit and it’s harder to find another man who can treat me as an equal.” Matthew is usually with what he would deem stronger women, saying—if anything—they are probably more in control than he is because he considers himself pretty laid back, going along with what they want. He does not know why he switches roles between the two; he can only say he has noticed it. While he talks to and dates a lot of women, he rarely sleeps with them because he has to decide whether or not he really wants to have “the sexual conversation.” If he does not want to go there, he will either resort to friendship or stop talking to them altogether. He chooses not to be forthright about it because he fears he will be fetishized as something other than male or female (a concern echoed later in another transgender female’s story). Many say there is a hormonal difference between women and men, often pointing to increased testosterone as causing a heightened sex drive or increasing manliness. As Holmes states (2007), “As for hormonal sex, while there is typically a difference between women and men in the balance of the different types of hormones, the differences are very slight. Women and men have the same hormones in very similar amounts.” When asking Matthew about testosterone’s effect on his body and inquiring about his heightened sex drive, he says that it is annoying but that it is not uncontrollable by any means. “I think there’s a spectrum of hormones more than a dichotomy between men and women,” he told me. “We all have different levels. I mean, you have control over yourself. If we as transgender men can do it, then so can cisgender men.”

He goes on to express that, as an undercover agent of sorts, he can confirm that “Men suck. Before, I’d sit around listening to my girlfriends talk about boys but it was never rude. They would say, ‘Oh, he’s cute or funny’... but guys say some real fucked up shit. You have to wonder where it comes from. I probably don’t even see as much of it as I could because I’m careful of who I’m around.” He says he sold furniture for a while and was engaged to a particularly beautiful woman. The guys felt comfortable saying inappropriate things to him about her and wanted to cheer him on for landing such a gal by looking her up and down and giving him high-fives and fist bumps. His boss would even call her “doll.” He says he remembers being on the other side of those things, being reduced to his ability to present well as a woman, but feels he sees and hears a lot more of it now that he is considered one of the guys.

Matthew said that if he chooses to confide that he is transgender to a person early on, he has noticed they will treat him more gently. He said it eventually wanes, but he believes that is due to him "passing" so well. He said, before transitioning, he was treated by the girls as one of the girls, that they were always nice about including him in girl talk, even if he had nothing to share, but that it seems as though what they expect from him has changed. “A lot of people are surprised that I’m a feminist for reasons other than it getting me points with the ladies. It seems like they are shocked when I’m not this patriarchal, make-me-a-sandwich, rape-joke kind of guy because that’s what’s expected,” he said. He went on to explain that his brother had to give him tips, not on being a man, but on how to not alienate a woman as a man. This was prompted when, upon leaving a restaurant while dining with his brother, Matthew was walking fast and came up on a group of women. He said his brother pulled him back saying they needed to walk further away and respect that women are leery of men. This is when he began to realize that women fear

him when they do not know him, except for when he works at a gay bar, where he gets better tips because they assume he is gay and, therefore, safe.

Transgender-Female Informants

Violetta

Born in New Orleans, Violetta currently lives in Mobile and is six months into her transition. A college freshman, she is without employment and insurance, unable to acquire hormone treatment and, therefore, passes less easily than other informants. She has let her hair grow long and dresses in female clothing for now, hoping to be on hormones in the future. Although she has never experienced what it truly means to pass as a female, she feels these changes allow her to feel more comfortable with who she has always been, even with the attention it causes her. Socially, she has been pushed away from religious groups she would have previously been a part of but has been taken in by others in the LGBTQ community. “Usually, when it comes to guys, I get harassment, threats, attempts to kill me—but with females they are accepting; they always want to help,” she said. “I was safer before I started passing. She feels that cisgender people only care about cisgender roles and dichotomies in our American society. When she *did* identify as male, she felt she had to play up her masculinity. She says she has also noticed that the gay community is divided on its stance regarding the acceptance of transgender people. She says that she has a lot of work ahead of her in order to pass and that its importance directly corresponds to how safe she feels. Beforehand, she was harassed by females for what they classified her as—gay—and goes on to explain that it is their acceptance she is really craving. As for telling her family, she said, “My older sister knows and I recently told my mom, but that’s about it. I don’t plan on going home like this though. I don’t ever plan on going home.”

Every morning, Violetta shaves, making sure to have clothes that fit with the female gender, usually skirts or dresses with heels or flats. If she wears tennis shoes, she says they are typically brighter and more feminine so as to make a feminine statement. She also wears makeup, but not much—just enough to show off certain features. She chose to pierce her ears, but then they got infected, and she had to remove the earrings. She also talks with her hands, saying she has always done this as most women do. Since she cannot access testosterone, she chose to begin a diet to purposely lower her testosterone and heighten her estrogen. She hopes to have surgeries as soon as possible.

“When I was four,” she said, “I came to the conclusion that I was a female, nothing else.” When it came time for her to go to school and use the bathroom, she went straight for the girls’ restroom and was turned away by the teacher. Violetta says that pretty much happened until she reached a grade where she learned about her body and found out that, because of her body parts, people see her as a male. After learning this, she went into a two-year-long depressed state during which she started self-harming and isolating herself from everyone. According to GLAAD, “41% of respondents reported attempting suicide, compared to 1.6% of the general population” ([Transgender FAQ](#)). The medical community is starting to consider the advantages of suppressing puberty in children who identify as transgender early on, though Oregon is currently the only state willing to pay for this hormonal-suppression (Foden-Vencil, 2015). According to Foden-Vencil (2015):

People with gender dysphoria that did not receive treatment had a much higher rate of hospitalizations or ER visits or doctor visits for depression and anxiety... and they had a pretty significantly high suicide attempt rate—some studies found about 30 percent. But folks when they received the treatment that they felt was adequate for their

gender dysphoria, had an almost normal rate of depression and anxiety compared to the general population.

After a few years, Violetta ended up in the hospital. She implied it was due to her depressed state, but she never clarified exactly what happened other than that, while she was there, a mysterious, transgender female showed up at her bedside, saying she understood what she was going through and told her to look up what it meant to be transgender. This mentor was later murdered by her lover, something which happens all too often to transgender females. “In 2013, 72% of anti-LGBT homicide victims were transgender women” ([Transgender FAQ](#)). Once Violetta was in high school, she felt there was not much more she needed to know, and she began to put together a plan to transition, starting with getting away to a place where she felt she could get help. She moved to Mobile to get away from her small town and go to college and was placed in the male dorms. Her first roommate asked to change rooms after two days. They then placed her with a guy, 12 years her senior, thought to be ok with her androgyny. “Once I came to my *full-time* experience, I started dressing as a female and I think it was a stab to his masculinity. He decided that, because of that, it was his job to enforce my masculinity. [He tried] to force me to be a male and it all came down to the point where he got in my face and threatened to bust my head into a wall and kill me,” she said. She then got placed in a different dorm with a new male who was straight and cisgender. He fully accepts her and often compliments her on her appearance.

When asked if it was easier to be on a University campus, generally perceived as a progressive environment, she said yes and no. “The need for passing on campus is really extreme because, if I don’t, I’m not allowed in female bathrooms or in much of anything that [is] specifically for women and not men. With dorms, I don’t have any choice. I’m rooming with a

male—but when it comes to certain things on campus, like V-Day, they specifically said ‘women who *identify* as women.’” She says that, while a third-gender option in America would have created a less-pressured environment for her to transition in, giving her the ability to focus on things outside of this transition, she would still have chosen to identify as a woman. “It’s both mental and physical problems that dressing and passing helps,” she said. “I dress as a female because it causes a whole lot less dysphoria than it would if I dressed as a man.” She says she knows she will receive harassment regardless of whether or not she dresses as a female because people are unable to appreciate her being an effeminate male.

Violetta deals with daily harassment—though most of it is indirect—through stares or hearing people talk behind her back. “It’s not direct, it’s just a knowledge of being different,” she told me. When asked if she thought the city of Mobile was open-minded, with regard to the trans community, she said that even though some individuals have been, overall, the city is not. She also mentioned that the government is trying to pass bills in certain states that say you have to enter bathrooms of your assigned gender, no matter where you are in your transition. She goes on to say that surgery is supposed to mean you are able to change your sex on any important documentation, but here in the South they will try to tell you that it cannot be done. “I know it can,” she said. “I’ve seen it. They make it hard to do these things.”

As for noticing changes in her interactions with men and women, Violetta says women used to talk to her softly, making sure she felt masculine and that they now treat and talk to her as though she is one of them. She said, “I’ve realized [females] are more soft-spoken because, in society, males are in charge... females don’t tell men when they’re wrong as to not ruin their masculinity or ruin the idea that men are in charge.” She believes transgender females have a much harder time than transgender males because it is more common to have masculine females

in society; it is more acceptable. She says, socially, it is acceptable for a female to wear a male's clothing—that it brings empowerment just because it is clothing meant for a man—but that it does not work the same way when a male dresses as a female. Females, from what she has seen, are perceived by men in society as being weak and inferior. So it is a sign of inferiority for a male to want to be like a woman. “That's choosing to walk away from a hierarchy,” she said. When asked how she felt about giving up that power, she said, “You have to give up something to gain something of equal value, or equality, as a whole. I was more androgynous before, so I only had so much masculine power. Some saw me as not masculine enough, so I was left out of a lot of things. Sometimes you'll go into a 'lower bracket' in order to have acceptance.” She worries she will get paid less if perceived as a woman and that if she does not look like something specifically male or female, she will not get hired at all.

Violetta identifies as a straight female and is currently dating a transgender male who is new to his transition. They met on a dating website and live in different states, having not yet met in person. She was looking for a cisgender male when she stumbled across him, stopping on his profile with a feeling that she needed to know him. She says they clicked and have been together for about two months. She went on to state that she has never, could never, date a female. “I was always interested in men, but the two years that I was in my depressed state, I considered myself a gay male,” she said, “but it still didn't feel like it all made sense.” Mostly dating straight males, none of her relationships have lasted longer than a few weeks. This is usually due to their being unable to see her as feminine enough.

Danielle

Beginning her transition in 1981, this 52-year-old transgender woman represents the longest transition of all my informants. She was born in and eventually returned to Fairhope,

where she now resides. She has a successful career as a Hospice nurse. “That’s the best place to hide and be transgender because they don’t care,” she said, “and that’s where I went and hid. How many had already seen, experienced, or knew about [being transgender]?” She began her transition when she was in high school by dressing and presenting herself as a female, mostly on the weekends and always in queer spaces. At that time, the drinking age was 19, and she was easily able to get into gay bars with girlfriends at the age of 15 since the person who worked the door would assume they were lesbians and willingly let them in. Due to the compliments she would receive while dressed as a female, Danielle says identifying as her true self made her feel like Christopher Columbus exploring a new world.

When Danielle was 12, she started taking piano lessons from a church member who ended up being a pedophile, molesting her every Thursday during their “piano lessons” until she was 15. The abuser would bring in friends whom he expected her to accommodate. She said of the incident, “He used the end of a piano leg on me rectally and I had to have reconstructive surgery. With a learner’s permit, I had to drive myself to the hospital because my family was not involved. I was in the hospital ten days and no one came to visit me but the abuser.” Danielle had already had two molestation incidences by now. The first happened when she was five, and her abuser was her dad’s best friend. She told her dad about the molestation, thinking he would be her savior. Her dad confronted his friend, who killed himself later that night. Upset, her dad came home and said, “Now we’ll never know the truth.” At the age of seven, she had another family friend who did the same, this time telling her mother who was too scared from the previous incident to do anything about it. She said, “I remember when I was 12, a neighbor laughing and making fun of me for shitting my pants because there was a spot on my trousers and nobody, including my parents, ever asked about it... This wasn’t what I wanted. My brother

had some friends over and they were out at the picnic table, my dad had a piece of rope and they were learning how to make a hangman's noose and when they weren't looking, I grabbed it off the table and hid it under the stairs." She hid it under the stairs on a Monday, but as Thursday got closer, her anxiety grew and she decided to commit suicide. By now, Danielle had come to the realization that she had no choice; she could not keep dealing with this every Thursday, years on end, so she hung herself from the noose hidden under the stairs. "I felt happy and free," she said, "and had no rectal pain and saw my mom coming towards me and then, next thing you know, I wake up in a bed and am told to take a Librium every day after school... which led to a drug and alcohol problem."

The first time Danielle ever moonlighted as a woman (outside of a gay bar), she went to a local movie theater to see *Jaws*. Someone she had gone to church with all her life recognized her as she entered the women's restroom and told authorities. "I could hear everyone screaming 'There's a man in there!' all loud and country... Since there were always police officers outside, I walked out and they literally put me in handcuffs and walked me right out to everyone standing around screaming and cheering. This was my first time going out like that, ever. I'll never forget this one woman kicking the stall door while saying, 'You fucking queer, get out of there!'" Danielle said there was a mob mentality that night as though they had "caught one," throwing empty cups while standing around the cop car, jeering. She had gone to the movies with two friends, but they disappeared while these events unfolded. Her dad was a police officer at the time and had to be called down to the station to get her. This was his first experience seeing Danielle as a female.

Danielle does not feel she necessarily has body dysphoria, which is not uncommon in the transgender community. Instead, she feels that her parents lacked involvement compared to those

parents who are more hands-on, assigning male or female identities to their children during developmental stages. “For me, I didn’t have anyone imprinting an identity or whatever. My brother had been killed before I was born. I was born with a job to replace my brother, so nobody ever told me to be a boy or a girl. I’m not saying that’s why people feel trapped, but that’s how I’ve packaged it off,” she said. Those checks and blocks did not exist. Instead, she feels she learned through observing and mimicking her older sister who raised her. Danielle’s experience is not new for the famous anthropologist Margaret Mead observed over 70 years ago:

Children learn to see themselves and what they do in relation to the people around them.

The first stage is imitation when babies start to learn how to be human by copying the actions of people around them. If someone smiles at them, they smile. As they get older children then begin to recognize the ‘significant other.’ They learn to take on the roles of their primary caregivers (usually parents). Play is very important at this stage as children often learn by acting out what they think their parents do. (Mead, 1962, as cited in Holmes, 2007, p.41)

Instead of feeling body-dysphoria, Danielle feels that she was becoming a better version of herself through a natural evolution. She never felt uncomfortable in her body even while presenting as a boy. She did, however, feel terrorized by the impending doom of puberty, knowing that she was about to start growing body hair and developing a deeper voice and that her genitalia would be changing. According to Foden-Vencil (2015), when hitting puberty, a transgender person can feel their body is turning on them due to changes which include the growth of an Adam’s apple, facial hair, body structure, periods, and those seen in genitalia. It is generally easier to prevent these changes with hormone suppression than to reverse the changes through hormone-therapy after they’ve already occurred. She began biting off her nails and was

unable to sleep. “It didn’t seem right and I wanted to stop it,” she said. “I’d heard one of those urban legends kids pass around about the Vienna Boys Choir being castrated so their voices wouldn’t change and they’d sound angelic the rest of their lives. I remember I wanted to join the choir at church, and I had a plan to somehow get into that choir and I was really serious about it; I was in survival mode. Even though it’s comical, I was trying to figure out how to get my needs met.” I later found that Danielle was misinformed in thinking this was an urban legend. Castrati were very prominent—often wealthy—opera singers from the 17th to 19th centuries who used castration as a means of preserving a boy’s soprano range into adulthood. However, this was a practice only used on individuals who showed great promise as soloists, not entire choirs, and the practice died out by the beginning of the 1800s.

Though her parents were largely absent in raising her, she originally identified as a gay male, and she remembers wanting to bring her first serious boyfriend home when she was 16 (he was 25) and her parents not liking it. Danielle’s parents were Southern Baptist. She remembers her mom being disappointed, saying, “They’ll never see how talented and how smart and how creative you are. That’s all they’ll ever see. You’ll never be able to get a job or work anywhere—I mean, you could probably work with the fair or travel with the circus. What are you going to *do*? You’re never going to get hired!” According to statistics, her mother is right: “[f]orty-seven percent of respondents to the NTDS reported adverse job consequences (defined as ‘being fired, not hired, or denied a promotion’) due to their trans status” (Greenberg, 2012). Having major crushes on news anchors, Danielle wanted to be on television—specifically on SNL. But her sister told her she was too effeminate for that, furthering her mother’s sentiments. So, instead, she decided she wanted to be a doctor, but they said the same. She looked around and saw that

her town's only gay male taught ballet. She felt limited. She said, "I kept thinking, 'I want to do all of these things, why can't I do all of these things?!'"

Her transgender status caused a ten to twelve year bout of barely being able to survive, being unable to find employment that would enable safe transportation as well as a safe place for her to live. She had friends who lived in Arkansas, so she decided to move and try out a new space. There, she found a restaurant and catering service that was willing to hire her. She had worked in restaurants before but had experienced situations in which patrons would sometimes threaten to publicly shame the business if it refused to fire her. Upon beginning work at the restaurant in Arkansas, she let the owner know that she was in transition, to which the woman replied that she already knew. Danielle says the woman was not wanting to offend her when she suggested toning down her appearance. "The girls around me were beautiful and bouncy, but they didn't wear a lot of makeup; they were country girls. I was in a redneck area and in survival mode, so I downplayed it," she said. She became the plain person, deciding makeup did not define her.

"I was raped and attacked during that time [in Arkansas] and I have a stab mark from trying to defend myself," she said. She feels people fetishize the community (a sentiment Matthew previously mentioned), and it is easy to prove by getting on any dating website and seeing how many men show interest. Many transgender women say that, while men are statistically known to inflict violence on transgender women, they also fetishize them in secret for being *different*, excited by the fact that they do not adhere to the gender-binary system. They often disrespect the transgender woman by working against her need to be identified as a woman or have surgeries. Mostly, they are interested in someone sporting both a penis and breasts and are not serious about entering into a public relationship, fearing people will question their

sexuality or manhood. “[When] they feel their manhood or sexuality is in question they decide that] the best thing to do is to shut you up or hurt you,” she said, “and I think that’s why many transgender women are killed.” She has had many experiences where men reacted to her violently, sporting three scars from three separate and violent occasions. Those are merely the ones that left a mark. She feels an urgency in saying we are murdering and killing transgender women of color. She says it is a crisis, and a state of emergency. “We had [a transgender woman of color] in Mobile that was killed and, eventually, the gentleman came forward and confessed. He’d had a sexual encounter, then all of the sudden internalized it and thought he was gay which isn’t how it works. But that’s the internal conflict—men who love trans-women are the most stigmatized of them all,” she said. I have to disagree that they are the *most* stigmatized since statistics show that transgender women have the largest amount of violence thrust upon them. However, men who love transgender women do face stigmatization for loving someone who, by many in American society, is deemed “unnatural.” It is one thing to *be* unnatural and have to love yourself, but it is another thing entirely to be natural and love something unnatural. Oddly enough, this stigma does not seem to equally be placed on the partners of transgender males. Danielle says it is very hard to get transgender women of color to come forward and talk about their lives, and that has definitely been true of my experience as an interviewer. According to Kellaway and Brydum (2015), “21 transgender women have been murdered this year alone, most of them women of color... That exceeds the number of transgender women killed in the U.S. in all of 2014...” This article was written halfway through the year and goes on to explain that those numbers are higher when the deaths which have not been reported or investigated, and victims who may not have been regarded as transgender women at death, are accounted for. Ten were shot, seven were stabbed, and three were beaten to death; all victims varied on the

"passing" scale. While Danielle feels unsafe and has been a victim of violence, she says she cannot complain because she is alive.

Danielle's dream is to marry and have children. She says it is the dream of many like her, though it is a hard dream to realize because men are too fearful. She thinks transgender men have an easier experience. She says many are attracted to women which, as previously noted, are less stigmatized by society. Therefore, people are less hesitant to have a public relationship with a transgender male. As a couple, they are also capable of having their own biological children rather than trying to get permission to adopt or having to rely on finding a partner who has children from a past relationship. She thinks the rise in pansexuals within the transgender community, something I have witnessed in many of my informants' stories, is due to having exhausted all other options while being hungry for a relationship. Danielle has had many relationships that failed and also two that were a long-term success. In the first, she experienced being a stepmom, raising two boys, until their father was killed in an accident and the state turned the boys back over to their abusive birth mother. She never saw them again. The second long-term relationship ended when her partner died of cancer. Danielle states that, in her opinion, transgender men have an easier time because they network with one another. *I have* found to be true within my study. That has not been her experience with transgender females. She believes our society is geared in a way that, despite one's color or age, males are supposed to be fixers. She said:

We put a lot of pressure on men without equipping, supporting, or teaching you. We expect you to have all of the answers and that's why a lot of their first marriages didn't work out. It's real easy going to work and coming home being the man and paying bills. Sometimes I want to ask transgender males how they feel about the roles they are given

by society. Women have complex roles—are we going to be the lover, mistress, wife? Do we have experience being a step mother? Gay originating women have never had children and they don't understand what they're not exposed to. I was put in that role. We got through it, but only with guidance.

She says transgender women love glamour as can be seen by the hype surrounding Caitlyn Jenner. "Thank God she passed. That's what money does. Sorry, but it does. If you don't... there's a lot of that posted online and a lot of women will post their experience about how horrible life is when you don't. Passing keeps people alive and employed so what are we doing for those that don't pass?" She said, in the internet age, a lot of those who do not pass try to work from home.

On "passing" keeping people alive, she said, "I passed after a certain point and that's the reason why I'm sitting here. I have a friend that's 6'4 and she doesn't pass, probably never will, but she has a place at the table." TransAdvocate (Taylor, 2013) seconds this by stating that this makes the patriarchy happy: "They want all women to meet certain stereotypical criteria which includes how you look, smell, walk, talk, etc. We should never tell our sisters that they must meet this criteria to be a woman." Taylor (2013) says identifying as transgender is hard enough, much less trying to live up to these "passing" requirements. Someone who knows they cannot pass well often feels defeated, fails to come out, and occasionally takes their own life. I was supposed to have a sixth interview with a transgender male. However, he was unable to interview as he was suffering over the loss of his friend—a transgender female and psychology graduate of the University of Lafayette Louisiana—the night before we were supposed to sit down together. Unfortunately, because some pass more successfully than others, there can be divisiveness and bitterness within the community due to the depression caused in those who do

not pass well. For those who do, spending time with someone publicly who is obviously transgender is a risk: they may be outed. This fear can cause severe anxiety. For example, Danielle mentioned a panic attack caused when a dental assistant tried to wipe remnants of rogue water off her face after a cleaning. Anxiety-stricken, she quipped at the dental assistant, “Quit wiping things off!” She says women like to point out that she wears too much makeup—not fully understanding her need to do so.

While she says there is a lot of information she could focus on, she feels the most important issue is to take care of the soul first, worrying about the transition later. She said:

I’m so far in the game, my perspective is that we really have to nurture the spiritual heart of the woman... I’ve had a difficult time nurturing deep relationships with women. I never could get below a certain level with women, despite being hungry for it for over 20 years, and I see that [hunger] in other women. It’s like, let’s build a quilt with each other. If cis-women would have been there to help teach me some of those things, it would have helped with expression. [Being a woman is] more than makeup and clothes and I remember getting certain magazines about child birth so I could adopt the language and talk about a gynecology visit like it was nothing, learning to carry tampons in your purse so you’re unclockable (a term used within the community when someone’s feminine persona makes them undetectable)... I remember someone saying ‘period panties’ and not knowing what it was and feeling so awkward and uncomfortable with myself. It was a developmental time in my transition and it really hurt and I thought ‘I have to learn this language like lines in a play because, without this—without help—trans-women end up killing themselves.’

Unfortunately, "passing" well can also mean a transgender person is unable to radar, or identify, their own community. Danielle once attended an art show in Florida and spent the entire night visiting with a gentleman, learning about his life, wife, and kids. Towards the end of the night, she learned she had been speaking with a transgender man. She also had an experience where a nurse unknowingly told Danielle her own story when gossiping to her about how the hospital down the street used to have a *he-she* working for it. Visibility is not only important to the transgender community, it is important for the development of the cisgender community. Visibility is the force that will cause the social evolution of having to see, address, accept, and understand transgender people.

Discussion

Liabilities of Passing

What I found in my research is that the more obvious liabilities of "passing" include the following: physical discomfort, a lack visibility which causes societal change, as well as divisiveness within the transgender community. Some of the stories shared with me were as simple as Matthew's being unable to get something out of a vehicle because his binder had already been taken off. Others, like Danielle, waited over 51 years before putting on a bathing suit and swimming in the beloved Gulf Coast she grew up near.

For transgendered males, a mastectomy can be hard to pay for without insurance, and using a binder ends up as a necessity. However, it is uncomfortable. It puts pressure on both the rib cage and the back, often causing transgender men to choose to gain weight on purpose in order to disguise their breasts by obesity. Binders should also not be left on for more than eight hours at a time, making time management important so that things like short bathroom breaks to relieve pressure can be scheduled. Transgender females are often protective of their makeup,

wearing it at all times even when it does not appear to make sense to do so. As Bischoff (2011)

notes:

Western society's obsession with gender binaries, whether it is based in a social constructionist or an essentialist paradigm, creates and perpetuates an obsession with passing. Serrano describes this obsession as passing-centrism, which serves to privilege the transsexual's assigned sex over their identified and lived sex, thereby reinforcing the idea that transsexual genders are illegitimate (p.113).

She argues that cissexuals are the ones who create, foster, and enforce "passing" through their tendency to treat transsexuals in dramatically different ways based solely on the superficial criteria of appearance. Thus, transgender people may feel compelled to pass as their desired gender and conceal their transgender history in order to avoid discrimination or violence. She also finds "passing" a "highly problematic term in that it implies that the trans person is getting away with something vs. merely dressing and behaving as themselves" (Bischoff 2011).

Another troubling con is visibility, i.e. the ability to recognize those in your own community. "The medical establishment is very much privileged as the solution to the transgender identity. In effect, the identity is somewhat erased, invisible, and all you see are men and women" (Bischoff, 2011). Almost every participant listed this as a liability. Because "passing" often equals survival, those who do it well are virtually unrecognizable, meaning their stories are veiled. Because of this, it is difficult to come across people who are going through the same thing and, in a community with high rates of depression, these connections could be valuable. We see the value of visibility, for example, in Danielle's story of connecting with a transgender male unknowingly. The lack of visibility also creates a problem within the cisgender community as it means the mainstream is unaware of the size of the community itself. Because

of this, American attitudes and behaviors towards the transgender community are not evolving.

As noted by Bischoff (2011):

Gendered violence occurs because society has not recognized transgender people as valid beings, thus they must pass in order to fit in the accepted gender binary system. But, should passing be used as protection? As long as people pass, then it is okay for gendered violence to continue because no one is questioning the norm. In this sense, passing is violence because it enables violence (p.121).

Our pronouns, which are usually limited to a binary system of male and female, can also create problems as some who fall under the transgender umbrella feel they embody both genders or neither, going by “they/them” instead of “him/her” and “ze” instead of “he/she.” Choosing these pronouns can mean a transgender person has to repetitively correct or instruct others on their preferred pronouns, which leaves them open to possible rejection and/or confrontation. The general public will usually (if not always) pick the pronouns they feel comfortable and safe with rather than a third-gender specific pronoun, as is more commonly used in Eastern countries.

One of the more confusing and dangerous liabilities is the danger of entering into a romantic relationship or sexual encounter. Gender and sexual preference do not go hand in hand. Being transgender is separate from being gay unless, of course, you are gay. While "passing" might save you from being asked the dreaded question of “what you have going on downstairs,” the conversation must take place at some point if a sexual act is to follow. Going on a date or being hit on while "passing" can mean that one’s date may not identify one as in a transition and may not handle the discovery well. Because of this, a transgender person has to decide when and how to have that conversation. When a relationship is established before taking the risk of sharing that information, it can often be a source of violence, especially for females, as men who

are unable to handle questioning their sexual affiliation can often act out with violence in physical, emotional, mental and sometimes sexual ways. Sometimes their reactions come much later in the relationship when straight men are no longer able to handle the fear that their loved ones might find out.

"Passing" can be both physiologically and fiscally limiting. For instance, a transgender woman cannot be made to have children, and many struggle with things that cannot be changed in an attempt to pass. For instance: height. That being said, "passing" is a limited tool in the transition process. Surgeries cost money, as do hormones. While insurance can sometimes help aid in affording these things, lacking the finances can mean sexual abstinence when a transgender person is unable to connect with their own body and sexuality. It also limits their ability to change their sex on written documentation, which often leads to employment issues. Until recently, this could also prevent them from marrying their partner of choice. However, that is not the only physical limitation as hormones can also damage their body, according to the largest study to date. Loudin (2014) states:

An incidence of hypothyroidism greater than 2% in a population that was largely younger than 40 years is surprising... However, one conference delegate said a 2% incidence of hypothyroidism in this sized population is likely... Another unexpected comorbidity, according to Dr. Asscheman, was the occurrence of seven male-specific cancers. He said this finding needs confirmation in other studies... The FTM subjects most often had the following side effects: acne with local treatment (2.9%, n = 15), weight gain (0.4%; n = 2), muscle pain (0.4%; n = 2), and liver-enzyme abnormalities (0.4%; n = 2).

"Passing" is also a practice limited to one's ability to take care of oneself. If, in the last stages of life, one lacks a caring individual who will advocate on their behalf or do the work themselves (shaving, makeup, upkeep of hairstyles and hormones and binding/packing) one will be forced into an identity one does not approve of or feel respected by. Therefore, transgender people who pass are left at the mercy of the staff at the nursing home, the hospice staff, funeral workers, and family members who may oppose of their lifestyle. Many are buried in an identity other than the one they spent years identifying as and can, therefore, be outed to friends and family members at their own funeral. This would also be true of any situation requiring a long and limited hospital stay where the person is unable pass on their own and is a fear that is not limited to the transgender community as many people fear a loss of control with old-age.

"Passing" well is usually a positive thing within the transgender community because it makes life easier. But, it can often cause divisions between those who do not pass well and those who do. Someone "passing" for safety purposes may feel anxious when being with someone who does not as it can out them by association. This can cause bitterness and divisions when trying to communicate and work towards solutions. While I am not surprised that our society highlights its most attractive members, it is important to note that adhering to these gender norms as a means to fit in can work against the transgender movement, celebrating the most glamorous with fame and fortune while those who have died remain unseen and unknown— their stories untold.

This brings me to my final liability: controversy over the term "passing" as it suggests a falsehood of *"passing"* instead of *being*. The conundrum being that the transgender person is only accepted into the broader community because they have learned to blend in or *look* like a true member instead of *being* a true member. This causes one to ask what the difference is between a true member and a false member. Is it the dichotomy of male and female? What

constitutes masculinity and femininity? Is it reducible to sexual organs? Does having surgery that changes your genitalia make you an authentic part of the group? Where is that line? Sociologists are, and have been heavily researching these questions and, for the most part, they find masculinity and femininity to be controlled by behavior and genetics that are much more fluid than our more conservative communities would have us believe. As Holmes (2007) notes:

Biological variations in sex are commonly reduced into just two categories—male and female—because for someone to be of in-between or ambiguous sex threatens a social order based on there being only two sexes. There is a whole series of decisions about what we can and cannot do and be which is organized around knowing whether someone is a man or a woman. Sociologists focus on the argument that once the decision about which sex we are is made, it has significant effects on how we live our lives (p 27).

I think that while the feminist movement has been incredibly purposeful, our society may need to address emotional empowerment in men as a way to calm their feelings of emasculation, and therefore the triggering of their defense mechanisms. Also, when such a small percentage of Americans claim to know a transgender person, the media becomes society's main mode of understanding the transgender community, and that causes problems as they are always putting the most *passable* face forward—the Lavern Cox's, Caitlyn Jenner's, and Ruby Roses of the community. These are people who are beautiful, fiscally privileged, and normal in appearance, people more easily accepted by the community at large. I do not have a solution to this problem other than to say that we, as a community, need to reach out to those who do not pass. I feel that lacking interaction with a community perpetuates stereotyping because the general public has little understanding of what it means to be transgender. Numbers show an ever-increasing awareness of transgender individuals in recent generations: "...according to a recent Harris poll,

only 16% of Americans say they personally know someone who is transgender, which has doubled from the 8% who said so in 2008. The same poll showed that while 27% of Millennials say they personally know someone who is transgender, only 9% of Americans over 45 say the same” (Transgender FAQ). In short, I understand the community’s need for safety and believe those who pass and are able to maintain their safety while telling their story (those same celebrities) are, at the very least, getting that conversation started while increasing awareness.

Observations

From my observations, there is a dichotomy between transgender males and transgender females, much like the male/female dichotomy we see in the cisgender community. From the small pool of participants I interviewed, all of them said violence is more frequently inflicted on transgender females. According to (Transgender FAQ), “Transgender people face staggering levels of discrimination and violence. In 2013, 72% of anti-LGBT homicide victims were transgender women.” Both Matthew and Chris noted having to be careful not to come off as threatening to women physically or conversationally, whereas Violetta said women open up to her with their criticisms of men, something they had been private about in the past when she identified as a male. She said they speak more softly when around men so as not to bruise their egos. Danielle’s main experiences with women suggest that they refrain from gathering together and spend less time helping each other out, when compared to men. While both Violetta and Danielle have had violent interactions with males, two of the transgender men have been privy to heavy doses of misogynistic conversations among the boy club.

Out of the three transgender males, all have been fairly successful at finding jobs. Louis’s company was willing to train their employees on sensitivity measures. Chris is a geologist who has steadily moved up in his company. Matthew works in sales and, even when bosses know he

is transgender, he is rarely harassed. Transgender female accounts of harassment in the workplace have been a completely different experience. Violetta, who wants an option that enables her to have a life outside of her rural community, cannot get past the initial interview stage. Part of this is due to her inability to pass, which stems from an inability to get hormones that are only affordable through health benefits provided by a workplace. While Danielle is now a veteran in her nursing field, this is largely due to the fact that she eventually found a way around the system by creating fake documents so she could pretend she had had a surgery she could not afford. This enabled her to change her sex “legally.” Now, unless she is forced to undergo a background check, she is undetectable. What this means is that she is easily able to keep a job unlike before, when she was openly harassed and repetitively fired. “Transgender people experience unemployment at twice the rate of the general population, with rates for people of color up to four times the national unemployment rate” ([Transgender FAQ](#)).

Out of the three transgender males, two are now married to women with the third recently breaking off an engagement. Both transgender women are single. Violetta says she has chosen celibacy for a variety of reasons, including safety. While both transgender men and transgender women often enter into awkward conversations about their bodies and sex-lives when entering a romantic relationship, only the transgender women were able to recount violent stories, scars, and wounds.

I believe many Americans’ are ethnocentric and, therefore intolerant of nonconforming sexual identities. This could be due to the fact that many Americans are clueless to the fact that many other countries do, in fact, accept three to five additional gender categories. It is because of this lack of awareness and education that American’s deem anything outside of the binary-

gender system as *abnormal* or *unnatural*, unaware that this violence is, instead, caused by a cultural problem. As Fausto-Sterling (1993) states:

Western culture is deeply committed to the idea that there are only two sexes...

but if the state and the legal system have an interest in maintaining a two-party sexual system, they are in defiance of nature. For biologically speaking, there are many gradations running from female to male; and depending on how one calls the shots, one can argue that along that spectrum lie at least five sexes—and perhaps even more.

Gender alternatives in other countries include the fa'afafine of Polynesia; “X-gender” in Japan; “others” in Nepal; the “kathoeys” (i.e. “ladyboys”) of Thailand; sworn virgins of the Balkans; and the five to six million self-identifying “hijras” of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan (though, here they go by “khawaja sara” because “hijra” is considered derogatory.) In 2003, Australia added “X” as a gender marker for “indeterminate sex” and in 2013, Germany became the first of the European countries to do the same. However, it is worth noting that there are concerns that “indeterminate sex” may encourage surgical interventions and that offering a legal, third classification will not necessarily solve all issues because it fails to address true classification concerns. Byrne (2014) feels that a third sex/gender classification should be voluntary, not forced, and that anyone identifying within any of the three classifications should have the same rights. However, I agree with Fausto-Sterling (1993) in feeling two to three gender options are not enough and that an advantageous approach might be to increase our options of self-identification when it comes to sex and gender. Byrne (2014) says, “People tend to identify a third sex with freedom from the gender binary, but that is not necessarily the case. If... they are compulsively assigned to a third sex, then the gender binary gets stronger, not weaker.”

From my observations, something in society is making men violent when they feel their sexuality and/or manhood is being questioned. It could be that our entire society is trying to over-simplify sexuality by stuffing it into a binary system, causing tension and pushback. It could be that men feel a loss of power because society has not yet allowed them to be effeminate—something that can be seen both through the violence men inflict on transgender women and through Violetta and Danielle’s stories of being harassed when identifying as feminine, gay males. The violence could also be a reaction to an oversimplified system of sexuality which ethnocentric Americans feel protective of. However, further research would need to be conducted to find out.

Conclusions and Future Study

Although "passing" has greatly improved all of the informants’ lives, allowing them to live as what they believe to be their authentic selves, it is a fact that their "passing" has a dark side: it puts off societal change in the transgender community for those brothers and sisters who do not pass. Bischoff (2015), author of *Passing the Test: The Transgender Body and Identity*, says she looks at "passing" as a tool for perpetuating violence as well as a tool for public and private confirmation of self, asking, “who do you pass for and why do you pass?” Though times are swiftly changing, with newer generations’ increased awareness of the LGBTQ community and their experiences, many still feel a pressure to adhere to the binary system. As my informants have explained through their experiences, Western culture is obsessed with gender binaries, which inevitably lead to the creation and need for one to pass, or fit into one of the two systems.

Most people, despite their gender, can probably think of a situation where they needed to pass. “Matilda, the radical queer activist who proposed this theory, confronts "passing", and all notions of belonging—in saying society imprisons people by judging a person’s authenticity or

normality, based off their ability to pass as ‘a woman, a Christian, or a good girl’ while causing people to hide their true selves” (Seal, 2007, as quoted in Bischoff, 2015). This is a normal part of life—a need to fit in in order to not be ostracized or punished for breaking boundaries, a need to survive and try to improve our quality of life. Bischoff (2015) refers to “Matt Bernstein Sycamore’s theory,” which states that “passing” is a means through which the violence of assimilation takes place” (Seal, 2007, as quoted in Bischoff, 2015). We have seen this through Danielle and Violetta’s story as males have tried to force assimilation by *teaching* and trying to *force* these women to identify as male. However, according to my observations, “passing” seems to matter more with transgender women than transgender men as they are experiencing violence at higher rates and are less tolerated when seen as an effeminate male. “In the case of transgender individuals, it is the other, the public, the society, that has the power to recognize them as intelligible or not, the power to give them value as human beings” (Bischoff, 2015).

In the end, both groups—transgender males and transgender females—are making the same, life-altering decisions, and both groups were equally pleasant and approachable. As Matthew said, it seems as though females are gaining something by becoming a male while the males are giving something up and paying a price which is suggestive of a patriarchal society. It makes it seem as though men still feel a need to dominate feminine energies, especially if it is a male venturing out of the masculine box they are told to stay in. However, to truly know why these discrepancies are occurring, a study would need to be done in larger numbers, one which would include other ethnicities, other transgender identities, and also cisgender candidates.

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